

Bogaerts brushes with greatness

Red Sox star-in-waiting draws attention of president, king, entire island of Aruba

Updated: April 2, 2014, 11:13 AM ET

By [Gordon Edes](#) | ESPNBoston.com

BALTIMORE -- The first [Red Sox](#) player President Obama mentioned at the White House on Tuesday was [Xander Bogaerts](#), described by the president as "the upstart rookie who took over at third base and didn't let up."

Heady stuff for a 21-year-old from Aruba, but not entirely a new experience.

"Well, what can I say?" said Sandra Brown, Bogaerts' mother, when a caller the other day mentioned the team's pending visit to Washington. "He met the king of the Netherlands too."



[\[+\] Enlarge](#)

AP Photo/Carolyn Kaster Xander Bogaerts (top left corner), who barely has gotten his feet wet in the majors, was singled out by President Obama at the White House Tuesday.

She laughed. "It's all in the line of what one achieves," she said, "and that's at the top of the line."

Bogaerts is the first player from the Netherlands Antilles -- the group of islands that includes Aruba; Bonaire, known as the Divers' Paradise, where he also lived; and Curacao -- to win a World Series ring. His mother, Bogaerts' twin brother Jair, his uncle Glenroy and Xander's girlfriend are planning to be in Boston on Friday, when he will be among the Red Sox players who receive their rings.

"I have an aversion to flying," Brown said, "but we don't know if he'll ever again get a ring. We want to make sure we're there for that."

Former Yankee Hensley Meulens, who is from Curacao, was the first from the islands to make it to the majors and the first to claim a Series ring, his won as hitting coach for the [San Francisco Giants](#). He was asked what impact it's made on Bogaerts to have played such a key role in the Red Sox winning it all last October.

"A young, good-looking kid like that?" said Meulens, who was in Curacao last November running a week's worth of clinics for coaches, as he has been doing all over the islands for years. "He has the island in the palm of his hand."

Meulens, who has played a huge role in the development of baseball on the islands in the 25 years since he played for the [Yankees](#) (from 1989-1993), said the sport has grown to become No. 1 there, displacing soccer. [Andruw Jones](#) (from Curacao) was the first real star from the islands, and now there is a group of emerging stars in numbers never seen before.

On Tuesday, Major League Baseball released its list of 223 players on big league rosters who were born outside the United States, and noted that there are five from Curacao, one more than its previous high, and one from Aruba: Bogaerts, the first from the island to make an Opening Day roster since [Sidney Ponson](#) played for the [St. Louis Cardinals](#) in 2007.

None of the players are just roster-fillers, either. [Atlanta Braves](#) shortstop [Andrelton Simmons](#), 24, is compared to Hall of Famer Ozzie Smith as a defender by Braves hitting coach Terry Pendleton, who played third alongside the Wizard of Oz. Simmons just signed a seven-year, \$58 million contract.



[+] [Enlarge](#)

Mike Buscher/Cal Sport Media/AP Images **Bogaerts became the youngest Opening Day shortstop for the Red Sox in 100 years.**

[Jurickson Profar](#), 21, was ranked as the top prospect in baseball when he was promoted to the big leagues by the [Texas Rangers](#), who shifted him from short to second, where he was expected to start this season until he tore a muscle in his right shoulder. He is expected to miss at least three months. [Kenley Jansen](#), 26, the closer for the [Los Angeles Dodgers](#), throws in the mid-90s. [Jonathan Schoop](#), 22, was the Opening Day second baseman for the [Baltimore Orioles](#) when they played the Sox on Monday. There is also 24-year-old [Didi Gregorius](#), the [Arizona Diamondbacks](#) shortstop who is listed as being from the Netherlands because he was born in Amsterdam but grew up in Curacao. And then there is Bogaerts, the youngest player in 100 years to open a season at short for the Red Sox, rated the No. 2 prospect in the game entering 2014.

All this from a place where nearly all of the baseball diamonds are still skin fields, Meulens said, with the exception of two fields with artificial surfaces.

"This is the best of the batch," he said.

The explosion of talent caught the eye of Dutch sports filmmaker Mart Smeets, who interviewed Bogaerts as part of a documentary that is expected to air in Holland in May. Smeets doesn't want you to get the wrong idea: Baseball is still a very minor sport in Holland. Yes, the king of the Netherlands met the players who represented his country in last year's World Baseball Classic, including Bogaerts, but when the Dutch upset Cuba?

"Most people didn't even know in Holland," Smeets said. "This is soccer country."

Still, as a lover of sport, and with a dollop of personal interest -- his son, Tjerk, was the catcher on the Dutch national team and is friends with Bogaerts -- Smeets was in spring training last month interviewing the island players, including Bogaerts.

"I asked them the question, 'Is it the water, the air?'" Smeets said. "Why do they fit so well into the game?"

Major league scouts are not waiting for an answer. Meulens said every team now has at least a part-time scout working the islands. When Craig Shipley still was the director of international scouting for the Red Sox and endorsed scout Mike Lord's recommendation that the Sox sign the Bogaerts twins, he was surprised that Xander hadn't popped on other teams' radar.

"We signed these twins from Aruba," Shipley said just months after they'd signed. "We don't like to say much, but the shortstop has a chance to be a really good player."

Brown, a social worker who studied in the Netherlands, worked with battered women and now runs a women's development program, a broader outreach designed to help women achieve their goals. She said it was no accident that baseball came into her sons' lives.

"Our whole family grew up playing baseball," she said. "Xander and his brother are the second generation in a family of guys who played.

"I grew up reading Baseball Digest. I would look at the pictures and say, 'Ah, let me see which one I will marry -- I will have a famous one.' Now I have my own little baseball man."

In a family full of strong women, including their mother, grandmother, an older sister and two aunts, Xander and Jair Bogaerts learned the game from uncle Glenroy, who employed an unusual teaching device -- the almond tree in the backyard.

"The famous almond tree," Brown called it. "He used to throw almonds for them to hit, first with a thin broomstick, then with the trunk of a Christmas tree."

Her vacations were spent going to all the places where the boys played, traveling abroad at a young age. The Red Sox signed the pair five weeks before their 17th birthday. Jair later was traded to the Cubs, who released him in June 2012. He's begun a career as a player agent.

Smeets, the filmmaker, visited Xander in Fort Myers.

"Xander is the thinker," he said. "He is very well brought up -- you can hear that, a class guy. I was very, very impressed by his knowledge of Dutch. He spoke classical Dutch. I didn't expect that from a kid in the Antilles."

Dutch is just one of four languages spoken by Bogaerts, though it is the primary language taught in school. He also speaks Spanish (Aruba is close to Venezuela), English and Papiamentu, the Creole Aruban language.

"Most everyone in Aruba speaks four languages," Brown said.

So it was not for a lack of vocabulary that Smeets discovered one topic that Bogaerts approached gingerly.



[\[+\] Enlarge](#)

Jeff Curry/USA TODAY SportsAfter starting the final seven games of the postseason for the World Series champs, Bogaerts turned Aruba upside down when he returned home.

"He was very reluctant to speak about himself, shy even," Smeets said. "He told me he had to prove a lot and was only at the start of what hopefully will be a good trip through the major leagues. He never spoke with a loud voice about himself. Never.

"He was a very, very nice guy to talk to. We were all surprised by that, our whole crew. What we expected was more of a 'bling, bling' guy. He's not that at all."

Brown traces that to the influence of Oma, the Dutch word for grandmother.

"Oma instilled in us not to brag and be boastful about successes and stuff like that," she said. "We do well, we excel, OK, what? It's done."

"That comes down the line. My mom taught us not to be showboats with successes, just humble. Do what we have to do."

Meulens had never met Bogaerts before he left Red Sox camp last spring and flew to Taiwan, where Meulens was preparing Team Netherlands to play in the WBC. With Simmons a fixture at short, Meulens asked the Red Sox if Bogaerts could play third, a position he'd never played. The Sox gave their consent, with the proviso that he not try Bogaerts in the outfield and also give him some ground balls at short.

"He was a quick learner," Meulens said. "Anything we threw at him -- bunt plays, positioning -- he picked up very easily. He was very keen to adapt."

Bogaerts played primarily at short last season for Triple-A Pawtucket; upon his call-up to the big leagues, he made a half-dozen starts at short, a half-dozen at third, then started the last seven games of the postseason at third. And when it was all over, and he went home, the island lost its mind for him -- throngs greeting him upon his return, the prime minister offering his congratulations.

"He knows his role is very important," Smeet said. "He comes from such a tiny little place on the island, where nobody really knew what he was doing. They know now. The Red Sox for them is a fairy tale."

Brown made it her duty to make sure Bogaerts was able to get his rest and maintain some semblance of normalcy.

"That was one of my first requests of the Aruban public," she said. "'We're sharing him with you, but please be considerate to let him do things he should be able to do.'"

It was a bit rough at first, but eventually things settled down for her little baseball man.

"Our lives are the same," she said. "It's just now the whole of Aruba is rallying behind him and singing his praises."

And this might be only the beginning, this chorus of commoners, a king and now a president.